

CONTENTS

	PAGE
Moapa Paiute Girl, 1925	COVER
Some Pre-ceramic Sites near Farmington, New Mexico, by L L. Sample and Albert Mohr	128
Paiute Trouble, by M. R. H.	146
A Petroglyph Cave on San Nicolas Island, by Charles E. Rozaire and George Kritzman	147
More About Shell Midden Necrology by MRH	151
California Indian Cannibal Tales, by William S. Groff, Jr.	152
Projectile Point Workshop, by Dudley Gordon	165
Dr. Alfred L. Kroeber, 1876-1960	166
Dr. Clyde K. M. Kluckhohn, 1906-1960	166
Dr. Manuel Gamio, 1883-1960	167
Indian's Use of Peyote Upheld	168
A Sioux Tribal Park	168
BOOK NOTICES —	
“Table Rock Pueblo, Arizona”	167
“The First Comers, Indians of America's Dawn”	167

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MOAPA PAIUTE GIRL
1925

A PETROGLYPH CAVE ON SAN NICOLAS ISLAND

BY CHARLES E. ROZAIRE AND GEORGE KRITZMAN

Incised petroglyphs and a few black pictographs are found in a sea cave which marks the end of one of the erosional sills that dissect a sandstone shelf along the southwest central shore of San Nicolas Island. Though the sandy floor of the cave is at sea level, water is kept out by large rocks at the entrance, except perhaps at rare times of extreme high tide during stormy weather.

The opening measures 19 feet across and is 9 feet high at the center. The roughly rectangular-shaped room of the cave extends back 35 feet where the walls begin to pinch in and the ceiling drops, making a narrow passage only a few feet high and wide which continues back about 150 feet. This natural tunnel was investigated by Edward Mitchell, Jr. and Jere Lipps who reported no markings on the walls. Some shell fragments were found on the sandy floor as far back as 75 feet.

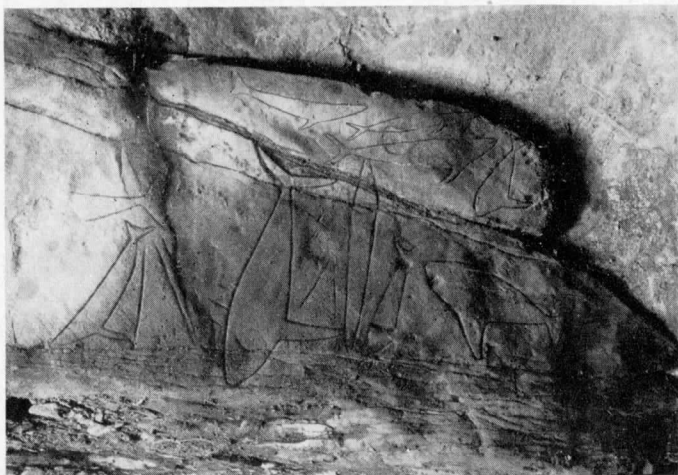


FIG. 5 — PETROGLYPHS ON ROCK IN CAVE, SAN NICOLAS ISLAND.

The drawings occur on four faces. The first group (Fig. 7) is on a large rock at the west side of the entrance and faces east. The other three concentrations of petroglyphs are on the bedrock of the east wall of the cave.

Toward the mouth of the cave is a natural shelf or ledge about 44 inches high from the floor and the top of it com-

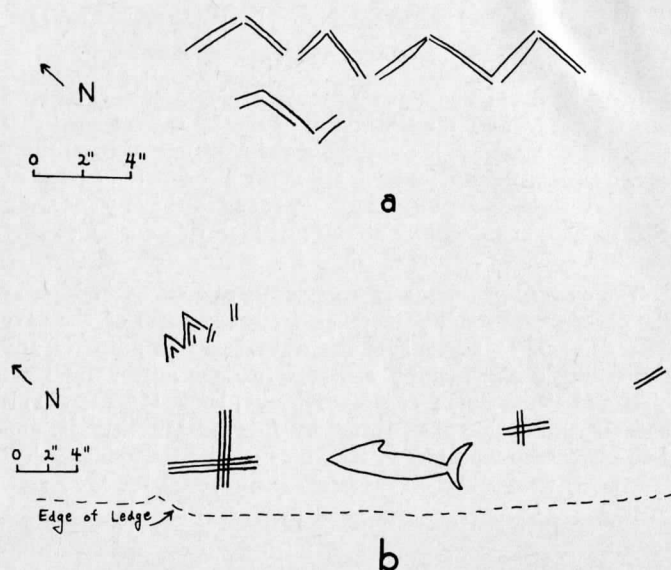


FIG. 6 — PETROGLYPHS ON CAVE LEDGE, SAN NICOLAS ISLAND.

prises the second face. The five elements, spread over a distance of $4\frac{1}{2}$ feet, are two pairs of zig-zag lines, two criss-cross lines and a fish; the southern half is represented by Fig. 6a and the northern half by Fig. 6b in their approximate relationships. The third face is vertical, 6 feet 4 inches north of the second, faces west and is the most striking "panel" (Fig. 5). The central vertical fish is 24 inches long. There are traces of red paint and possibly a deep blue in the grooves, but it is not certain if these colors are the remains of aboriginal efforts or were added to accentuate the lines for better photographic reproductions by others.

The fourth face contains both incised petroglyphs and pictographs in black. They begin $5\frac{1}{2}$ feet north of the third face, but due to the curvature of the wall, they tend to face south and west. The representations are spread over an area about 10 feet long with a maximum width of about 4 feet. The grooved petroglyphs extend along and just below a shallow ledge about 5 feet high (Fig. 8). Below them are the pictographs painted in black (soot?). The latter can only be made out with difficulty and it appears there were others, but they

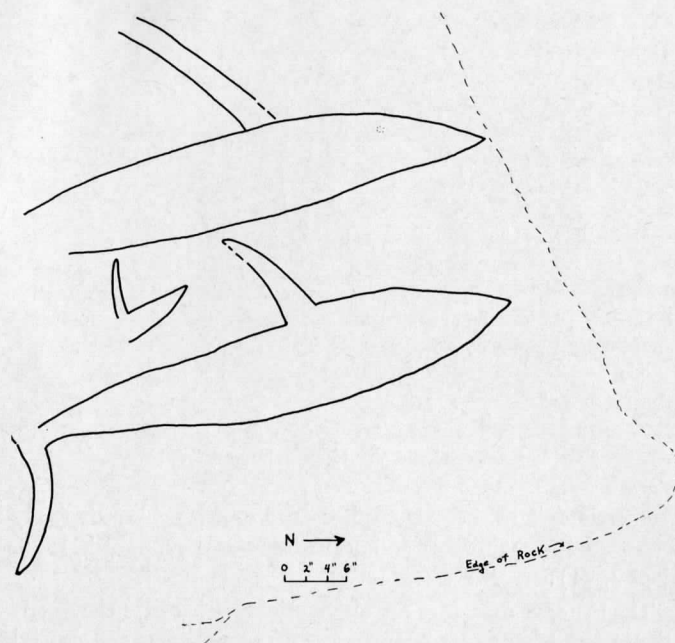


FIG. 7 — PETROGLYPHS ON CAVE WALL, SAN NICOLAS ISLAND.

are too indistinct to be drawn with any certainty.

The representations depict various types of sea life, but exact identification is difficult due to the generalized form and lack of fin detail. The center drawing of Figure 5 is suggestive of the shark and those figures with a long fin extending out from the back remind one of the killer whale or false killer whale. The marlin or swordfish may also be possibilities; however, lack of the prolonged, pointed upper jaw makes this conjecture doubtful. Porpoises or Dolphins might be considered in addition.

The portrayal of sea life by naturalistic carvings in the round is a characteristic of southern California coastal art, but does not occur in pictographic or petroglyphic form. So far as the authors are aware, drawings of fish either in pictographs or petroglyphs have not been found along the southern California coast to date except for a group of petroglyphs in Baja California on the Gulf side near Mulege, about 1000 miles to the south (Hanner, Ms.). However, the use of simple

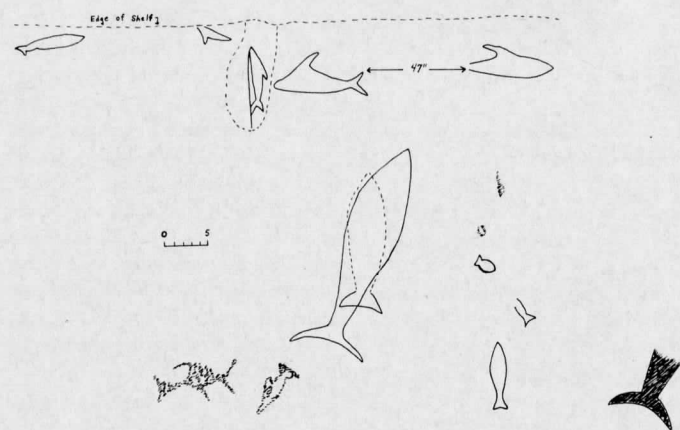


FIG. 8 — PETROGLYPHS AND PICTOGRAPHS ON CAVE WALL,
SAN NICOLAS ISLAND.

geometric designs, i.e., zigzag lines and crosshatching, is fairly widespread in California and adjoining states (Steward, 1929, Maps 2, 21).

The sea cave drawings are also distinctive because they constitute one of the rare occurrences of petroglyphs for coastal southern California. A few simple geometric figures are known from two shelter sites in Ventura County, one in Piru Canyon and the other at Burro Flats, in addition to the maze design at Trabuco, Orange County, reported by Steward (1929, p. 90, site 70). It would appear that painting on bedrock is the typical coastal trait, while pecking of rock surfaces is more common to the interior desert areas (Steward, 1929, p. 219). However, some factors to keep in mind when considering regional traditions of technique are in the degree to which weathering may have obliterated more extensive evidences of pictographs in the Great Basin region and the extent to which the nature of the rock has influenced or discouraged the making of petroglyphs along the coast.

The purpose of these drawings is inferred to have been related to some beliefs of a religious or magical nature. If these were made for pure pleasure or as ordinary expressions of artistic talent, it would seem they would occur commonly elsewhere on the Island on the many rock outcroppings that were available. The special nature of the drawings, being

"hidden" within a sea cave and including almost solely the representations of fish, would point to the prominence of these animals in the life of the people. The importance of fish in the realm of the supernatural for the coastal Indians is also indicated by the remains of swordfish headdresses found in place with male burials on the Santa Barbara mainland (Rogers, 1929, p. 410). Interestingly sea mammals such as seals are not depicted, though their bones are found in significant numbers with fish in the Island middens and carvings in the round were made of them. We can only speculate, as with the European cave paintings that these naturalistic representations of animals may have functioned in some magico-religious way to insure an abundant and continuous supply of these life forms and/or to assure a successful hunt for them.

There is no positive way that these incisions and paintings can be dated. The temptation is to place them relatively late in time, perhaps just a few hundred years prior to Spanish contact. At least it is fairly certain that the cave had already been formed and was accessible during that period. But again they may be very much older since it would be understandable that by the time the Indians reached the Island several thousand years ago (cf. Rozaire, 1959, p. 148), fish would have already formed some vital aspect in their magico-religious life.

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MORE ABOUT SHELL MIDDEN NECROLOGY. Regarding George E. Fay's article, "Necrology of a Shell Midden" in our last issue, we visited the site, near Guamas in Sonora, last August and found the "Bunga Bunga Night Club" has become a mere restaurant. Around it scattered shells only remain of the midden.

MRH